

Obituaries

# Samuel Snipes, lawyer who defended first black family in Levittown, Pa., dies at 99

By Kristen de Groot  
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Samuel Snipes, a white lawyer who held off an angry mob while representing the first black family to move into the all-white development of Levittown, Pa., in 1957, died Dec. 31 at his family farm in Morrisville, Pa. He was 99.

His family confirmed the death but did not disclose the cause.

In 1957, Mr. Snipes represented Daisy and Bill Myers when the black couple and their three young children moved into Levittown in Bucks County, Pa., about 20 miles from Philadelphia.

“He felt they had every right to live there,” said David Kushner, author of the 2009 book “Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America’s Legendary Suburb” that explored the ordeal. “He played a pivotal role in helping the first African American family move into Levittown and left a really wonderful legacy in that regard, in taking on the system and doing what was right.”

Mr. Snipes handled the closing on the home purchase and informed local police that an African American family would be moving into the development, knowing that controversy would follow, Kushner said.

The Myers family’s arrival on Aug. 13, 1957, sparked weeks of unrest, harassment and cross burnings. Threats were made by phone, by mail and by screaming, spitting protesters outside the family’s home.

At one point, Mr. Snipes held off a mob of enraged white people until police arrived.

“He was trying to ward them off, and they started throwing lit cigarette butts at him, and one hit him in the chest,” Kushner said.

Mr. Snipes, in an interview with the Associated Press in 1999, recalled standing outside the home as a crowd of several hundred called him a betrayer of white people. He said the mob chanted, “Thirty pieces of silver, thirty pieces of silver,” a reference to the amount Judas Iscariot was supposedly paid to betray Jesus.

The governor eventually ordered in state police.

The Myers family stood their ground, remaining in the home until 1961.

When Levittown was under construction from 1952 to 1957, its builder, William J. Levitt, touted it as “the most perfectly planned community in America.” Its 17,311 houses would sprawl over eight square miles, featuring yards and common areas.

But like his other projects in Nassau County, N.Y., and later in New Jersey, Levitt refused to sell to black people. He defended the practice as a business decision.

Recent census estimates put Levittown’s black population at less than 4 percent.

Samuel Moon Snipes was born Aug. 15, 1919, and grew up in Bucks County. During World War II, he was a Quaker peace activist and a conscientious objector. After the war, he worked for the United Nations in Germany, helping to relocate refugees, including escorting trainloads of displaced people returning from ghettos and concentration camps to their homes in Poland and Hungary through Russian lines, his children Jonathan Snipes and Susan Snipes-Wells said Tuesday.

“He was raised as a Quaker, and he believed on a spiritual level that all people have a basic, intrinsic equality and it is our duty to stand up for that,” Jonathan Snipes said. Decades later, survivors whom he helped would visit Mr. Snipes at his farm, his children said.

Mr. Snipes graduated from law school at Philadelphia’s Temple University in 1953 and practiced law in Yardley, Pa., for 50 years, specializing in estate planning and civil law. In 1967, he represented clients opposing the Centennial School District’s distribution of Bibles to students. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled against the district.

As Falls Township solicitor in 1972, Mr. Snipes thwarted an attempt to build a nuclear power plant on an island in the Delaware River, across from Pennsbury Manor, the summer home of William Penn. “My greatest courtroom victory,” he told the Bucks County Courier Times.

His wife of 51 years, Barbara Taylor Snipes, died in 2001, and one of their sons died in 1989. Survivors include his second wife, Marion Smith Snipes; five children from his first marriage; nine grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren.

— **Associated Press**

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